



Article: Notice to the Reader: Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature* in Canada
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Notice to the Reader: Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature* in Canada

Lynn Curry, Tania Passafiume, Geneviève Samson, and Meaghan Scanlon

Abstract

As the first commercially published book illustrated with photographs, *The Pencil of Nature* generates considerable historical interest, much of which is centred on the photographs rather than the book. The importance of the photos places *The Pencil* at an intersection in terms of how it is perceived: it is somewhere between a published book and a photograph album. This paper outlines the custodial history and conservation treatment of Library and Archives Canada's copy of *The Pencil of Nature*, examining the mixture of archival, library, and conservation practices at play in the stewardship of such an important and complex document.

Notice to the Reader.

The plates of the present work are impressed by the agency of Light alone, without any aid whatever from the artist's pencil. They are sun-pictures themselves, and not, as some persons have imagined, engravings in imitation.

—Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature*, 1844, 5-line “Notice”

Introduction

The historical interest around the photographs in *The Pencil of Nature* places it at an intersection in terms of how it is perceived: it is somewhere between a published book and a photograph album. Today, fewer than thirty-nine complete copies are known to exist; about the same number are found in museums as in libraries, reflecting the fact that the presence of the early Talbotype plates turns *The Pencil* into something more than the typical book of its era. Library and Archives Canada (LAC) has the complete first fascicle of *The Pencil of Nature* as well as eight extra plates. This paper will discuss the provenance of LAC's copy and present a detailed summary of LAC's custodial treatment of it, looking at the decisions which have been made regarding intellectual and physical control, with a focus on conservation and rehousing.

Historical Sketch

The Pencil of Nature was the first commercially published book illustrated with photographs. Five years prior to its publication, Henry Fox Talbot had invented the negative-positive process. The salted paper positive process was used to create the photographs in these books. Beginning in 1844, this publication was released in parts over a span of two years, during which time one could purchase the six different fascicles individually. Although the technique it presented was revolutionary, *The Pencil of Nature* was not a commercial success at the time.

The Pencil presents a challenge in some ways to conventional ideas of what makes a book. It was not uncommon in the 19th century for books to be printed in parts (Charles Dickens was publishing the last instalments of *Martin Chuzzlewit* when Talbot issued fascicle 1 of *The Pencil of Nature*), but the fact that so many surviving copies of *The Pencil* are fragmentary is perhaps unusual. In his article “Henry Fox Talbot’s *The Pencil of Nature*: A Revised Census of Original Copies,” Schaaf finds that almost every copy is different, and notes the difficulty of finding a single “standard” copy: “[p]ast assessments of this seminal publication were often generalized from the attributes of a single copy; in many cases that copy was demonstrated to have been exceptional.” This heightened variation among copies may stem from the fact that, unlike many books, *The Pencil* lacks a narrative: as long as each photo is associated with the correct accompanying text, changing the order of the photos does not create confusion for the reader the same way taking two instalments of a serialized novel out of sequence would. As Schaaf notes, “[t]he fact that *The Pencil* was issued as a part book encourages owners to restructure theirs. This is readily understandable and probably does little harm” (Schaaf 1993, 388).

Purchase and Custodial History

In April 1849, an angry mob burned down the building housing the parliamentary library of the province of Canada in Montreal. Over the next few years the library’s collection was partially reconstructed, but tragically a significant portion was destroyed in another fire in February 1854. The following year, faced with the task of rebuilding the library collection yet again, Parliament’s Joint Library Committee appointed Alpheus Todd, assistant librarian, to undertake a book-buying mission in England and France. Todd was in Europe for eight months and obtained by purchase and donation a large number of books; he estimated that once all orders had been filled, “the number will probably exceed 20,000” (Canada 1856, 19).

Among the items Todd acquired was a complete copy of fascicle 1 of *The Pencil of Nature*. He noted it in the ledger in which he kept track of all his purchases as “Talbotype, the [p]encil of Nature, 4^{to} 1844,” and recorded the price paid as four shillings and sixpence (Todd 1856, 38) (figs. 1, 2). This price represented a substantial discount over fascicle 1’s original price of 12 shillings, especially considering that the copy Todd purchased included eight extra plates. The exact date of purchase is not recorded, nor is the name of the seller. However, Todd’s “A Report of the Librarian of the Legislative Assembly on the State of the Joint Library of Parliament” mentions the London-based publisher and bookseller Henry G. Bohn as providing “the choicest portion of our *English* books” (Canada 1856, 15). The presence of labels on two of the extra plates – *Martyr’s Monument, Oxford* and *Gate at Christ Church* – which read “On Sale at Messrs. BROOKS (Brothers)” may be evidence of another source.

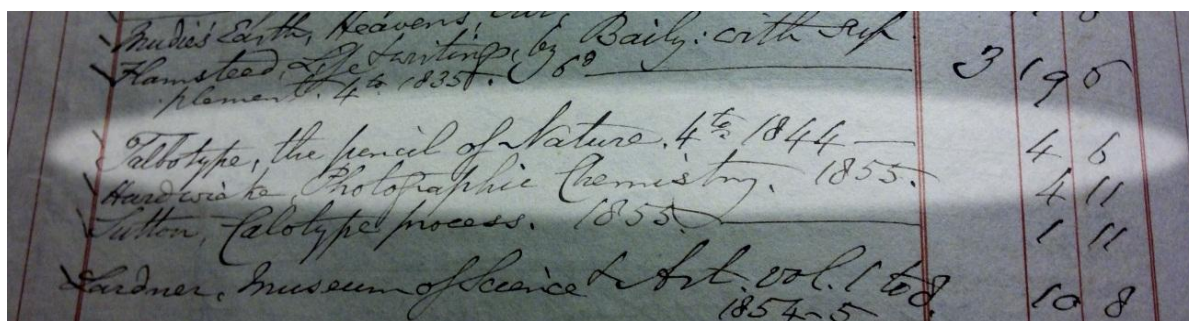
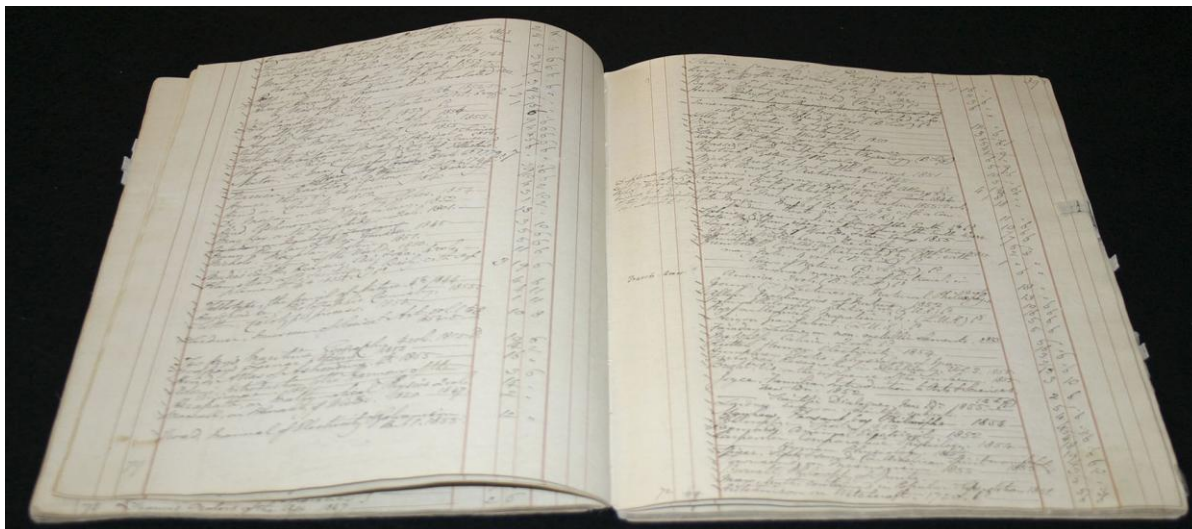


Fig. 1. Alpheus Todd's Ledger: List of Works Purchased in England and France in the year 1855. Ledger open to pg. 38-39 (top).

Fig. 2. Detail of the entry "Talbotype, the pencil of Nature, 4^{to}, 1844 4/6" pg. 38 (bottom). Reproduced with permission of the Library of Parliament.

The book remained in the custody of the Library of Parliament for over 100 years until it was transferred to the National Library of Canada (NL). The precise date of *The Pencil of Nature*'s arrival at the NL is unknown; however, a large number of rare books were transferred from the Library of Parliament to the NL in the 1960s and it is possible that *The Pencil* was among them. At NL it was stored in the Rare Book Collection at the shelf location TR144 T2 1844 fol., where "fol." (abbreviated from "folio") is a size classification indicating that the item is over 9.7 in. (250 mm) tall.

In 1967, in celebration of the 100th anniversary of Canadian Confederation, a number of new government buildings were inaugurated in Ottawa, Ontario. One was a joint repository for the Public Archives and National Library, known as the PANL building, which featured shared facilities and conservation services. After 30 years, both institutions had outgrown the building which no longer met the current environmental standards for archival or library collections. The two institutions physically separated. NL remained in PANL while the collections and preservation staff from the National Archives, previously known as the Public Archives, moved in 1997 to the Preservation Centre, a custom built, state of the art storage facility with conservation laboratories located in Gatineau, Quebec.

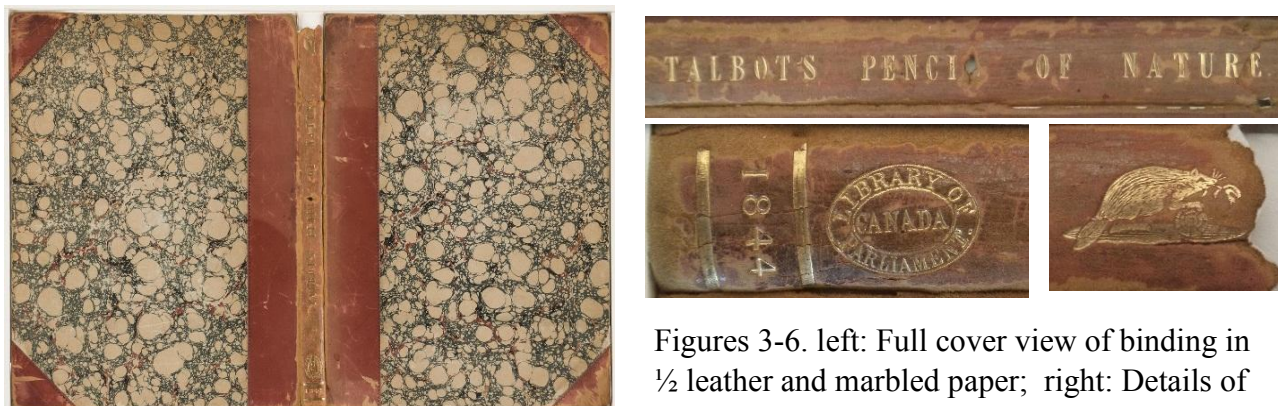
Pre-Conservation History

In 2002, despite being in a fragile condition, the NL's copy of *The Pencil* was exhibited in a show entitled *The Photographically Illustrated Book in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Schwartz 2013). The attention generated provided an opportunity to coordinate the first concerted conservation effort between photograph and book specialists.

Conservation treatment would address the fragility and improve access; however, due to changing priorities and pressures, the treatment would not be complete for another seven years. One of the first challenges encountered had to do with the inadequate storage environment at PANL and whether *The Pencil* should return to permanent storage in that location after being exhibited. During discussions *The Pencil* remained in a secure, controlled environment in the conservation laboratory at the Preservation Centre. The 2004 merger of the National Archives and National Library which created Library and Archives Canada (LAC) figured prominently in additional delays as staff of both institutions were reassigned and negotiations for special collections storage space were finalised. However, this merger ultimately provided a solution to the previous storage issues as *The Pencil* was granted a permanent home at the Preservation Centre. In 2006, with a mostly new team in place, the conservation file was re-opened.

Description and Condition of Binding

Fascicle 1 with eight extra plates was bound in a ½ leather binding without the original notice or wrapper, measuring 12.12 x 9.25 x 0.68 in. (306 x 233 x 17 mm). The text block sewing supports were laced through the boards, which were covered in red vegetable-tanned calf skin and marbled paper. The leather covers were decorated with a blind-roll design around the edges. The leather spine was gilt with various tools and stamps, the first being a beaver, an ownership symbol for The Library of Parliament, followed by the title [TALBOT'S PENCIL OF NATURE.], then [LIBRARY OF PARLIAMENT CANADA.] and ending with the publication year [1844] (figs. 3-6).



Figures 3-6. left: Full cover view of binding in ½ leather and marbled paper; right: Details of title and tooling on the spine.

SHEET	SIGNATURE, TEXT AND PLATES
	Flyleaf
1	<i>Title Page</i>
2	B <i>Introductory Remarks</i>
3	(Cont'd)
4	C <i>Brief Historical Sketch</i>
5	(Cont'd)
6	D (Cont'd)
7	(Cont'd)
8	E (Cont'd)
9	(Cont'd)
10	F (Cont'd)
11	(Cont'd)
12	G (Cont'd)
13	(Cont'd)
14	H (Cont'd)
15	(Text, Plate I)
16	<i>Plate I. Part of Queen's College, Oxford.</i>
17	I (Text, Plate II)
18	<i>Plate II. View of the Boulevards at Paris.</i>
19	(Text, Plate III)
20	<i>Plate III. Articles of China.</i>
21	K (Text, Plate IV)
22	<i>Plate IV. Articles of Glass.</i>
23	(Text, Plate V)
24	<i>Plate V. Bust of Patroclus.</i>
25	<i>Extra Plate 1. The Martyr's Monument. (5:XXI)</i>
26	<i>Extra Plate 2. Magdalen College, Oxford.</i>
27	<i>Extra Plate 3. Queen's College, Oxford. (1:1)</i>
28	<i>Extra Plate 4. Cloisters of Lacock Abbey. (4:XVI)</i>
29	<i>Extra Plate 5. The Tower of Lacock Abbey. (5:XIX-B)</i>
30	<i>Extra Plate 6. Botanic Gardens, Oxford.</i>
31	<i>Extra Plate 7. Gate of Christchurch. (4:XVIII)</i>
32	<i>Extra Plate 8. High Street, Oxford.</i>
	Flyleaf

Fig. 7. Collation diagram.

The text block edges were coloured red. The blue endbands were a stuck-on style. The double folio flyleaves were made of plain wove paper. The spine was backed and heavily rounded with a plain paper lining. The text block consisted of nineteen printed sheets and thirteen plates. The pages were not numbered. Every second printed sheet was identified with a signature letter from B to K, no A or J. The thirty-two sheets were gathered into ten signatures, each made up of three to four single sheets. They were stitched together using the over-cast sewing technique, in which a thread spirals over the spine edge from back to front and top to bottom, piercing through each signature and perforating the sheets (figs. 7-9). The signatures were then sewn onto three recessed cord supports. Although the book was clearly identified as being in the Library of Parliament of Canada, it is not clear where or when the original wrapper was removed and the subsequent leather binding added.

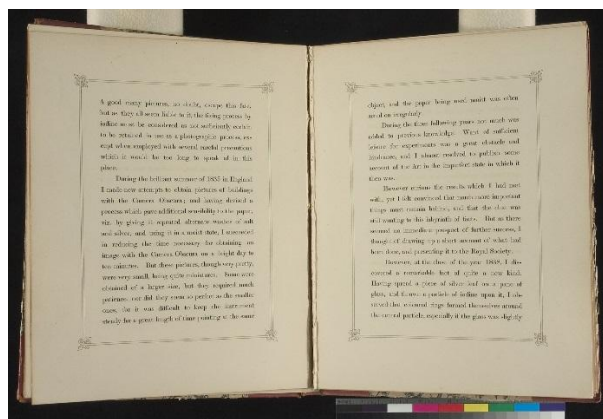


Fig. 8. Over-cast sewing before conservation (left).



Fig. 9. Dismantling of text block, detail of the 32 sheets gathered into 10 over-cast sewn signatures (right).

While it does not specifically mention *The Pencil of Nature*, Todd's report describes expenditures for bindings carried out in Europe on numerous items before they were transported to Canada. (Canada 1856, 10). Identification of the leather, marbled paper and binding features suggest a typical late 19th century binding with no indication of the bookbinder. It would be speculation to say which scenario is more likely: that the book was bound as we find it now when Todd made his purchase in 1855, that he had it bound in Europe and the Library of Parliament stamps were subsequently applied, or, lastly, that the book arrived in Canada in an unknown binding state and was bound at the Library of Parliament.

Prior to conservation treatment the binding was in poor condition, with the front board having detached completely and the leather being split at the back joint and missing completely at the top end-cap. In addition, the sewing had broken in many places throughout the text block and the front flyleaf had broken away at the perforation line. It was evident that the pages were under tension during handling due to the over-cast sewing. This, combined with the perforations from the sewing, put the pages at risk of tearing or detaching.

Description and Condition of Photographs

The five plates in fascicle 1 are typical in sequence and image quality in comparison to other fascicle 1 copies. Bound with LAC's fascicle were eight extra plates, five originating from other fascicles while three were never part of *The Pencil*. The five plates from other fascicles are as follows: *Martyr's Monument, Oxford* (fascicle 5, plate XXI); *Queen's College* (fascicle 1, plate I); *Cloister of Lacock Abbey* (fascicle 4, plate XVI); *The Tower of Lacock Abbey* (fascicle 5, plate XIX-B); and *Gate at Christ Church* (fascicle 4, plate XVIII). In his article, Schaaf indicates that plates which were sold separately would have had, "PATENT TALBOTYPE OR SUN PICTURES" labeled or stamped in blue on the verso (Schaaf 1993, 389). The five extra plates just mentioned do carry this label on the verso. However, two of these, *Martyr's Monument, Oxford* and *Gate at Christ Church*, have the complete label with a majuscule "OR" and include the address of the bookseller. Two others, *Cloister of Lacock Abbey* and *The Tower of Lacock Abbey*, both have the label with a majuscule "OR", but do not carry the address. Finally, the verso label found on *Queen's College* features a miniscule "or", but with the bottom section cut off; therefore, no address can be seen, if it was indeed originally present. Out of the five, only one, the *Queen's College* plate, has the typical ruled line around the image. This plate also lacks a plate number and on the verso features a handwritten title as well as other text, both of which have been cut off. Thus, it can be assumed that this page was larger than the fascicle at one time. Two of the five plates, *Martyr's Monument, Oxford* and *Queen's College*, have been mounted by their edges to the support, and the other three, *Gate at Christ Church*, *The Tower of Lacock Abbey*, and *Cloister of Lacock Abbey*, have been mounted overall to the secondary support. Only *Martyr's Monument, Oxford* has a printed label adhered to the support centred below the photograph reading: "The Martyr's Monument, Oxford. *From Nature.*"

In addition to the five plates described above there are three extra plates that were not originally part of any fascicle (figs. 10-12). They are titled: *Magdalen College, Oxford*; *Botanic Gardens, Oxford*; and *High Street, Oxford*. All three plates have the typical blue stamp on the verso that indicates that they are "PATENT TALBOTYPE OR SUN PICTURES". The blue stamp on *High Street, Oxford* is slightly smaller than the stamps on the other two pages. All three plates

are mounted overall onto secondary supports ruled in pale brown ink. This type of mounting is unusual, as all other known fascicle images are mounted by the edges alone, with the ruling in pale brown ink. Only *Magdalen College, Oxford* has the image corners cut at a 45° angle. On the verso of all three, hand written in pencil or in ink, are the titles and numbers; however, some have been cut off, which would indicate that the pages were larger at one time and were likely trimmed during the binding process.



Fig. 10. Extra Plate 2, *Magdalen College, Oxford*. Left is recto, right is verso
Measurements: Secondary Support 11 x 9.1 in. (298 x 232 mm); Image: 8.2 x 6.5 in. (208 x 165 mm); Stamp: 1.3 in. (33 mm).

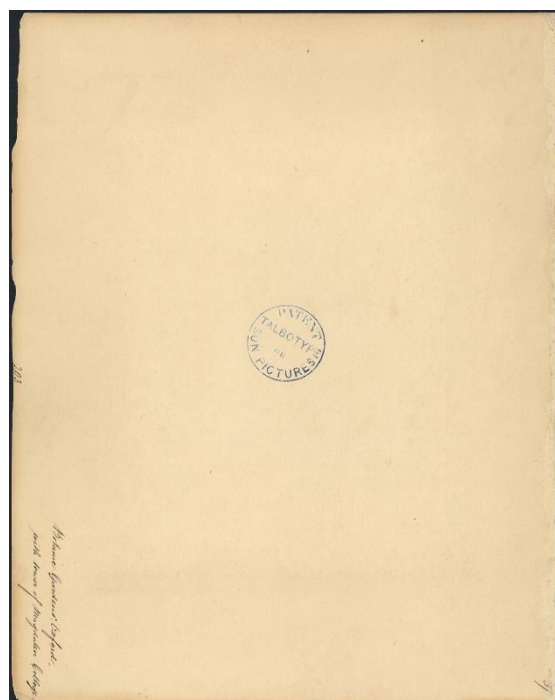
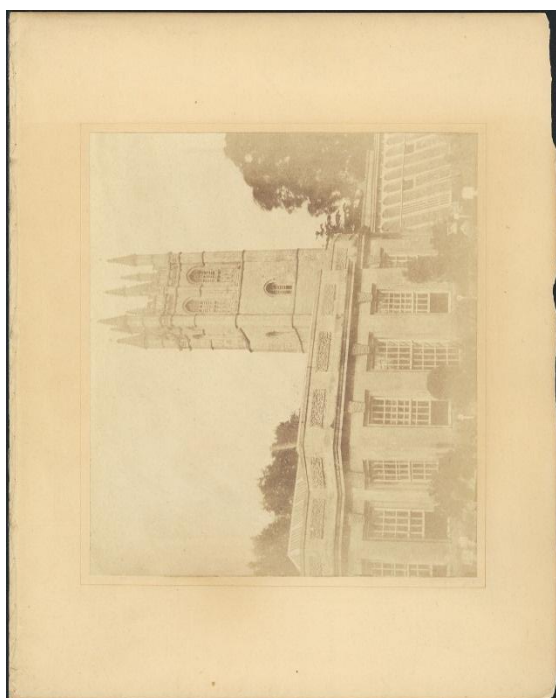


Fig. 11. Extra Plate 6, *Botanic Gardens, Oxford*. Left is recto, right is verso
Measurements: Secondary Support 11 x 9.1 in. (298 x 232 mm); Image: 7.6 x 6.4 in. (193 x 164 mm); Stamp: 1.3 in. (33 mm).

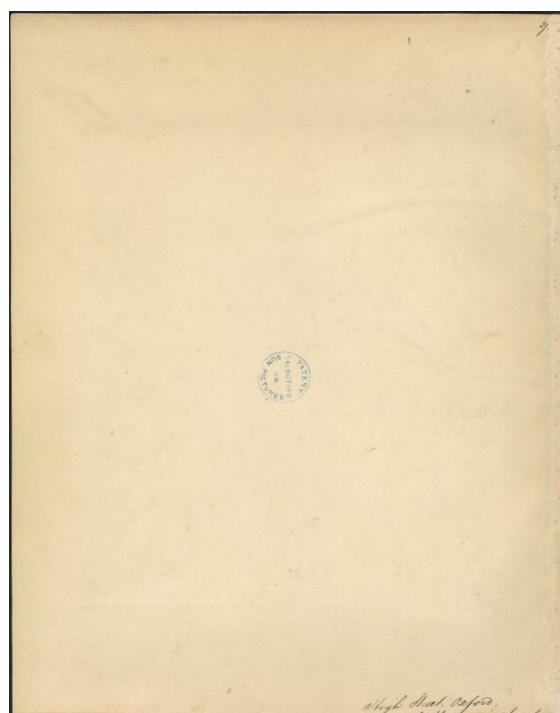


Fig. 12. Extra Plate 8, *High Street, Oxford*. Left is recto, right is verso
Measurements: Secondary Support 11.7 x 9.1 in. (299 x 231 mm); Image: 8.2 x 6.8 in. (209 x 174 mm); Stamp: 0.8 in. (21 mm).

The photographs in the fascicle and the eight extra plates are in fair condition, as some photographs have faded to the typical yellow/green colouration and others have only faded along the edges, leaving a rather characteristic reddish colouration in the centre of the image. There is one photograph within the fascicle, *Articles of China*, Plate III, which has a transfer of text from the adjacent page onto the centre red high-density area of the photograph.

Conservation Options and Decision Rationale

Due to the overall condition of the photographs, support pages and binding, an investigation was begun to determine an appropriate conservation solution. Schaaf's census was reviewed to locate other copies for comparison (Schaaf 1993). A consultation opportunity was then arranged for LAC conservation staff to view complete contemporary wrapper binding structures of *The Pencil* fascicles at both the New York Public Library and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The knowledge gained by consulting other original copies was influential in the development of the following conservation options.

Option 1: Fixed leaf format

1.1 *Maintain the current binding through conservation.* This was not considered an option due to the fragility and conditions mentioned above.

1.2 *Reconstruct the original structure as produced by the publisher.* This was not considered a satisfactory structure for LAC's *The Pencil* as it would necessitate the use of adhesives and would pose other associated risks to the book. The Perfect Binding of the original issues relied on adhesive and leather applied directly to the spine edge of the fascicles' single sheets to secure the pages together with the printed paper wrapper. The Perfect Binding has proven time and again to be an unreliable binding technique as the adhesive dries and crumbles and pages begin to separate and detach.

1.3 *Reconstruct a binding in the style of the current 19th binding.* This was not considered an option due to the damage already caused by the over-cast sewing.

Option 2: Flexible format

2.1 *Provide an alternative binding structure and incorporate existing components as permitted.* This was not considered an option due to the historical significance of the fascicle format. Techniques such as adding repair tissue and adhesive to join sheets in pairs for the creation of signatures to sew through the fold were seen as too intrusive as the format would be completely altered.

Option 3: Accessible format

3.1 *Disbind the structure into single sheets and maintain the binding components separately.* This was considered the most appropriate option in relation to Talbot's publication objective, which was to present the text and accompanying plates in a wrapper. The extra plates were to be individually matted.

Conservation

LAC's conservation staff chose to pursue option 3 with the additional conservation objective of minimizing risk during handling and viewing. The treatment itself began with dismantling the text block by removing the over-cast sewing threads. The text pages and secondary supports of the plates were then surface cleaned with an Absorene dirt eraser and residual adhesive was mechanically removed. Localized humidification and repair along spine edges was necessary on the text pages and secondary supports of the plates. A wrapper was constructed for the fascicle's loose sheets using an acid free paper, and the plates were interleaved with Usumino Kozo tissue. No conservation treatment was carried out on the photographs. To facilitate public access and record current condition, high resolution digital images were taken of *The Pencil* including the binding, the recto and verso of each page, and the extra plates.

Housing

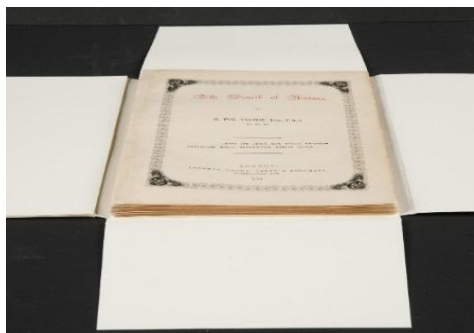


Fig. 13. Fascicle 1 in a four-flap.

A standard acid free storage container measuring 21.2 x 17.3 x 4.3 in. (540 x 440 x 110 mm) was selected to house the binding, the fascicle, and the matted extra plates. The size of the matted plates measures 20 x 16 in. (509 x 460 mm) and required thin spacers to be placed as fillers in two sides of the container. A PAT approved acid free mat board was selected for the housing. The binding was laid open to allow full view under a sheet of Mylar® and secured with archival mounting corners into a sink mat with a protective cover. Fascicle 1, complete with its five plates in a four-flap made of acid free paper, was also

housed in a sink mat with protective cover (fig. 13). Each extra plate was individually matted in a sink mat as follows (figs. 14, 15):

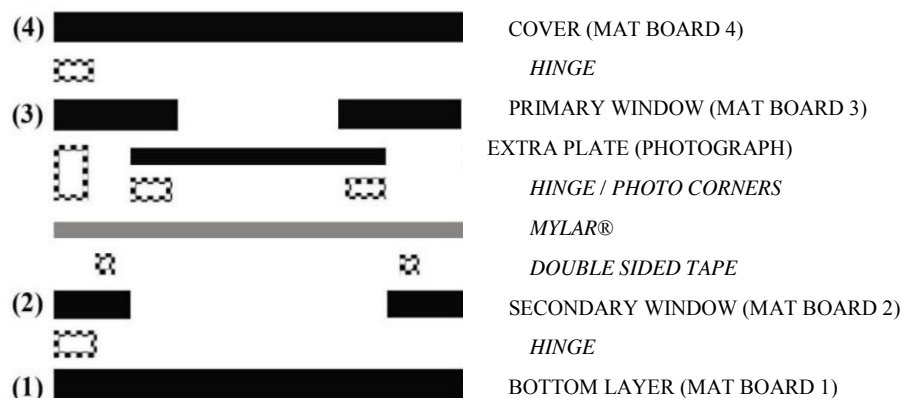


Fig. 14. (1) Bottom layer (mat board 1); (2) Secondary window mat (mat board 2) was cut just larger than the overall secondary support; (2b) a sheet of Mylar® was attached with double sided tape to the recto of (2), and Filmoplast® P90 was taped along the recto exterior; the photograph was attached to the Mylar® with four archival mounting corners. (3) Primary window mat (mat board 3) was cut, permitting the view of the image only for presentation; (4) cover (mat board 4).



Fig. 15. Cover (mat board 4) / primary window mat (mat board 3) (*top*); Primary window mat (mat board 3) / secondary window mat (mat board 2) and Mylar® and Plate (*centre*); Plate with Mylar® and secondary window mat (mat board 2) / bottom layer (mat board 1) (*bottom*).

Current Intellectual Control

Despite the fact that it has been disbound and thus no longer resembles the popular image of a book, LAC continues to treat its copy of *The Pencil of Nature* as a published monograph rather than an object in the photograph collection. *The Pencil*, in its custom housing, resides in the Rare Book Collection at LAC's Preservation Centre in a vault at 18°C and 40% RH, which are the same environmental conditions used in the vaults housing the general photograph collections. Due to its rehousing in a large archival box, *The Pencil* is no longer shelved upright. Instead, the box is kept in flat storage with other oversized material such as atlases and large plate books; to reflect this change in location, the size designation "fol." has been changed to "xx.fol.," the code LAC uses to indicate books which are over 20 in. (500 mm) tall and must be shelved flat.

The intellectual treatment of *The Pencil of Nature* as a book is consistent with the original circumstances of its publication; it was, after all, first published as a fairly conventional book – with the notable distinction of being the first published book to feature photographs – and it seems logical to continue treating it that way. It should also be remembered that copies of *The Pencil* were issued as fascicles: the bindings would have been added after purchase, if desired, as was fairly standard at the time. Therefore, it does not appear that the presence or the lack of a binding should enter into whether or not an item is considered a book.

Conclusion

Library and Archives Canada's treatment of its copy of *The Pencil of Nature* reflects the item's complex history. The historical significance of the fascicle format influenced the conservation methodology, resulting in the disbinding of the book and the creation of custom housing for the binding, the fascicle, and the extra plates. Despite the change in its physical circumstances, *The Pencil* nonetheless remains a book, and its intellectual treatment reflects that.

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